



## Aberystwyth University

### *Towards the politics of causal explanation: a reply to the critics of causal inquiries*

Kurki, Milja; Suganami, Hidemi

*Published in:*  
International Theory

*DOI:*  
[10.1017/S1752971912000127](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971912000127)

*Publication date:*  
2012

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Kurki, M., & Suganami, H. (2012). Towards the politics of causal explanation: a reply to the critics of causal inquiries. *International Theory*, 4(3), 400-429. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971912000127>

#### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Aberystwyth Research Portal (the Institutional Repository) are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Aberystwyth Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Aberystwyth Research Portal

#### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

tel: +44 1970 62 2400  
email: [is@aber.ac.uk](mailto:is@aber.ac.uk)

**This is a pre-print ‘accepted for publication’ version of the article ‘Towards the politics of causal explanation: a reply to the critics of causal inquiries’. It will appear, subsequent to editorial input of Cambridge University Press, in *International Theory* in 2012. Copyright for this publication is held by Cambridge University Press.**

**The research leading to these results, on the part of Milja Kurki, has been funded by the European Research Council under the European Community’s 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme (2007-2013) ERC grant agreement 202 596. All views remain those of the authors.**

## **Towards the politics of causal explanation: a reply to the critics of causal inquiries**

Milja Kurki and Hidemi Suganami

### **Abstract**

Causal inquiry has been a controversial matter in International Relations (IR) scholarship in recent years. While many new ‘non-positivist’ stances on causal analysis have been developed in recent years, many post-positivist and critical theorists in the discipline have remained unconvinced of the virtues of causal inquiry. Crucially, the political consequences of causal analysis seem to be a sticking point for many such critics. Yet, the politics of causal analysis are, we argue, complex and relatively poorly engaged with at present. Indeed, the arguments against causal analysis which rely on warnings concerning the political nature of causal analysis are inadequate and incomplete. We contend here that causal analysis is, indeed, political but that this does not mean that we should not engage in causal inquiry. On the contrary, we argue that this is what makes causal inquiry interesting and important in social science. A more nuanced and reflective approach to dealings with the politics of causal analysis is needed, and it is such a response that we provoke critics of causal analysis to consider.

### **Introduction**

Causal inquiries are central to the study of society and history in general and in the historical and social scientific studies of world politics, in particular. However, a number of highly influential academics have expressed negative views about the role of causal analysis in the study of world politics. Their reasons for their negative assessment of causal enquiries vary (see e.g. Kratochwil, 1989; Edkins, 1999; Fierke, 1998, 2005; Zehfuss, 2003; Campbell, 1998b, Hansen, 2006) but their common line is that the undesirable political implications of producing causal explanations are so overwhelming that such an activity should be abandoned.

This refusal to engage positively and constructively with causal explanation is significant. Not only does it foster a bifurcation in the scholarly analysis of international politics between ‘causal’ and ‘non-causal’ analysts, but also it can reproduce in the discipline very specific understandings of causal analysis – in particular, understandings which do not take adequate account of the possibility of more nuanced non-positivist approaches to causal analysis. Causal analysis in world politics, as in the study of society and history more generally, we accept, is not politically neutral, but the political implications of causal explanation are not overwhelmingly dangerous or negative as the critics suggest. Positive,

thoughtful and constructive treatments of the complex and interesting politics of causal analysis are necessary.

As a move towards a better, more helpful, debate on the politics of causal inquiry, this article offers a necessary first step: a detailed examination of the plausibility of existing engagements by critics of causal analysis with the political (and ethical) implications of causal inquiry.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, we examine in detail four different objections the critics of causal analysis have advanced with regard to the allegedly noxious politics of causal analysis. First, through a detailed analysis of Maja Zehfuss's engagement with causal explanation in relation to 9/11, we examine the argument that causal analysis is problematic because it gives rise to dangerous or politically problematic 'origins' narratives, the claim that the tendency to seek to reduce explanations to 'origins accounts' creates politically dangerous dynamics in the social world. We argue that while causal analysis does indeed involve origins narratives and is 'political', the overwhelmingly negative political consequences implied by Zehfuss do not follow. Second, through an examination of Jenny Edkins's work on famine, we consider the argument that causal analysis gives rise of 'technologisation' of the social world and processes in it. We find that this is not the case, certainly if what is to count as a causal explanation is not confined to the Humean or positivist version, but also when the 'Derridean' logics, which Edkins invokes, are closely examined. Third, with reference to David Campbell, we examine the claim that causal analyses are tied to truth claims which hide the contingency and political nature of social processes. Contrary to Campbell, we find that causal analysis can bring out the contingency of social life and, in fact, encourages a pluralistic debate about diverse ways of reading social life. Fourth, with reference to Friedrich Kratochwil, we examine the claim which suggests that causal accounts render difficult or impossible debate about moral responsibility in social life. We find that rather than disabling such a debate, it is precisely a causal issue that is at the heart of debates on moral responsibility.

At this point, a few caveats and clarifications are in order. While, for the sake of clarity of exposition, we draw here on the works of selected individual authors, it should be noted that their lines of argument emerge, if in somewhat less clearly expressed forms, also in the works of certain other authors (e.g., Hansen, 2006; Erskine, 2003; Elias, 1970, 1991). It should also be noted that the individual lines of argument, and the objections we look at, often overlap in the authors' works. With this in mind, we would like to remind the readers that the aim here is not to advance criticisms of individual authors, or their specific philosophical perspectives, but to evaluate - in their own terms as well as in terms of the narrative model of causal explanation we propose below - the levels of persuasiveness of the logics of argument embedded in their various claims about causal analysis. Perhaps we should add that, although three of the four authors we examine in this paper have been associated with the label 'poststructuralism', it is not our purpose here to tackle these authors as representing 'poststructuralism' or offer a critique of 'poststructuralist stance' on causal explanations. We are interested in their criticisms of causal analysis because we believe that their positions on the politically negative functions of causal analysis can lead analysts of political affairs and international relations to adopt superficial understandings of causal enquiry. They need to be challenged, notwithstanding the fact that we believe the individual authors examined here to be outstanding and rightfully influential thinkers in the discipline.

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Political implications', 'political judgements', and the like are also 'ethical implications', 'ethical judgements', and the like to the extent that they overlap, which, in our view, they often do. They are 'normative' and relate, among other things, to the organization of our society at all levels and our conduct in the society as well as on behalf of the society in relation to others. When we write 'political', therefore, it is not our intention to demarcate it from 'ethical' as it is done by some writers.

Before we engage with them in turn, we first outline our view of causal explanation. This is necessary in order to show where we are coming from on this issue and part of the reasons why we find some of the claims made by the authors under examination unacceptable. We then move to a detailed examination of the reasoning of the four authors in turn. This is followed by a brief section, clarifying the nature and extent of our disagreement with the four authors. In the concluding discussion, we reflect further on the sources of our commitment to causal analysis and debates in the study of world politics.

### Explaining an outcome causally<sup>2</sup>

In the study of world politics by IR scholars and Historians, it appears to have become customary to remark that there are two paradigms of causal explanation: one is to follow the so-called covering-law model of explanation; the other is to offer a narrative account of how a given end state came to be (Lake 2011: 474-77). In the former, which is a corollary of the Humean conception of causal relations as regular conjunctions, we explain a given outcome (y) by pointing to its cause (x) and showing that x-type conditions (or ‘initial conditions’) are known regularly to be followed by y-type outcomes under the type of circumstances (c) which prevailed in this instance but which cannot be stated exhaustively (Hempel 1965). In the latter, we explain the outcome (y) by giving an account of how the process unfolded from some beginning point to the point where y took place. Here we do not necessarily refer to a discrete event or condition as *the* cause but the unfolding process as a whole is presented as having brought about the outcome (Suganami 2008, 2011). However, those events and conditions which are incorporated in the causal narrative are, of course, those judged to be significant ones in some sense.<sup>3</sup>

Between these two, the latter has the advantage of being able to address a wide range of questions found significant regarding the unfolding process ending in y. Unlike the former, the latter has no rigidly prescribed format to structure it.<sup>4</sup> It also keeps open what the beginning point is, depending on the interest of the inquirer. By contrast, the former has two great disadvantages. First, in world politics, there are hardly any well-established facts of the form: under c-type circumstances, x-type events are regularly followed by y-type events. The so-called Democratic Peace Theory is an exception to this general rule, which is why it has attracted so much attention among the researchers. Second, even if we were able to point to such a fact and ascertain that, in the case in hand, c-type circumstances prevailed and an x-type event did occur, all we could conclude, on these grounds, would be that a y-type event was to be expected. But the statement that y-type event was to be expected, given the initial condition and the circumstances that prevailed, answers only two questions: (1) was a y-type event expected and (2) what were the conditions that made it an expected thing? Crucially, we are left unclear about how it was, or how it came about, that, given these conditions, y followed on as expected. If we are curious about this, then we need to show how, *through*

---

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article, we use ‘to explain’ to mean ‘to impart an understanding’. *To explain an outcome causally*, which is one instance of *explaining* in general, is to impart an understanding of the outcome’s *sources and emergence*. Clearly, we are not equating ‘causal explanation of outcomes’ to ‘rendering comprehensible/intelligibilizing’ in general, which is a much broader class of activity (Suganami 2008). It should also be noted that, in this section, we are stating our view on what is involved in offering a causal *explanation*. Our separate views on causal *relations*, critical of those, following Hume, reduce them to regular conjunctions, are found elsewhere (Kurki 2008; Suganami 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Some historians and social scientists classify them into various types in terms of their explanatory roles within the narrative. See, for example, Stone (1994) and Russett (1962).

<sup>4</sup> But since there is a tendency for the questions raised to fall within a conventional range, narrative accounts given in response tend to exhibit family resemblances in structural terms. See, for a detailed examination of this point, Suganami (1996, 2008, 2011).

*what intelligible connection*, the beginning (x) and the end (y) were linked; and to show this is to give a narrative account which has a beginning-middle-and-end structure.<sup>5</sup> And, importantly, a narrative account will explain an unfolding process, ending in y, regardless of whether the sequence thereby presented instantiates any regular pattern or not. That, too, is the advantage of a narrative explanation; it can be used to explain regular *and* irregular sequences of events. Given that regular sequences of events are relatively rare in world politics, there is little doubt that the narrative mode of explanation is better suited to that field than the covering-law model.

But this is not quite all we need to state to clarify our view of causal explanation. A few further observations are in order. First, it is not at all uncommon for a causal narrative, especially in the study of world politics, to include an explanation of why someone took the decision to do something. This point is worth stressing as there is a tendency in some quarters (e.g., Hollis and Smith, 1999) to treat this kind of explanation as reason-giving accounts categorically distinct from causal explanations proper, equated with covering-law explanations. But causal narrative explanations are a response to questions raised about the process of transition ending in an outcome and these questions are likely in fact to include those concerning the motives behind certain key decisions – especially in a field such as world politics. We do not therefore see why reason-giving accounts cannot form part of an overall causal narrative.

Indeed, according to R. G. Collingwood, in its historically original sense of the word ‘cause’, ‘that which is caused is the free and deliberate act of a conscious and responsible agent, and “causing” him to do it means affording him a motive for doing it’ (1938: 86). What some philosophers have come to distinguish from ‘causes’ as ‘reasons (for actions)’ are, therefore, what the word ‘causes’ originally meant; besides, there are some philosophers who consider the distinction untenable in any case (Davidson 1963). Collingwood adds: ‘For “causing,” we may substitute “making,” “inducing,” “persuading,” “urging,” “forcing,” “compelling,” according to differences in the kind of motive in question’ (1938: 86). We would add ‘enabling’ to Collingwood’s list. This seems warranted especially since the difference between ‘enabling’ and ‘compelling’ is not always obvious as when, for example, a parent enables/compels his/her child to become more independent. Stating the *modality* of how someone was caused to act in a certain way – whether s/he was ‘compelled’, ‘induced’, ‘encouraged’, for example – involves ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz 1973: 5-6, 9-10), interpretation, and judgement, which are key elements of causal understandings with respect to human social actions everywhere, including, of course, the field of world politics. This is an important feature of our understanding of causal explanation which does not reduce it to a regularity-based argumentation.

Second, however, a narrative explanation may incorporate as its ingredients a species of covering-law explanation. This happens when certain connections or turns of events are left unexplained because they conform to our general knowledge or when certain well-known generalizations are invoked to suspend further questioning. In the latter case, the narrator is telling the reader that there is nothing especially puzzling about the particular turn of events in the overall process as these things are known to happen (Scriven 1959). This may not constitute an ultimately satisfactory account but there is no such thing as an explanation that answers everything. Indeed, explanations are impossible without leaving many things unasked. Among them are certain turns of events which are treated as unpuzzling because they are familiar – although, it has to be stressed, ‘familiar’ is not the same as ‘comprehensible’.

---

<sup>5</sup> What Jack Levy (1986: *passim*) calls ‘theoretical linkages’ can be understood as the middle part of narrative explanations. See also George and Bennett (2005) on ‘process-tracing’, which produces narrative explanations.

Third, it is a characteristic of a narrative explanation that details deemed irrelevant are omitted although some irrelevant details are at times deliberately incorporated into the narrative to add authenticity to the account being given. Narrative accounts expand and contract in response to the felt explanatory needs. A covering-law explanation could be understood as in fact a form of narrative explanation where the middle part is omitted as being already familiar. One important feature of a causal assertion, either of the compressed covering-law type or a fuller narrative type, however, is that the person who makes it acknowledges, or is deemed to suppose, that there is some more detailed account to give. Thus, Mackie (1974: 45) pertinently remarks: ‘Where we have no hesitation in making causal statements we can tell some more detailed causal story’.<sup>6</sup>

In short, to give a causal account of a particular outcome, in our view, is to offer a relevantly and adequately detailed causal narrative. This suggests that the two-paradigm view is unnecessary; the covering-law model of explanation is subsumed under the narrative model as a contracted form of narrative explanation subject to expansion as and when required. This being so, the (still very popular) view that prioritises the covering-law model of explanation, closely associated with the Humean conception of causal relations as regular conjunctions, is, in our judgement, mistaken; and, in any case, the model is rarely applicable in the study of world politics and quite useless in making world political outcomes actually *comprehensible*.

Having briefly clarified our position on causal explanation, we now move to discuss the four authors we have selected as especially noteworthy critics of causal enquiries in the study of world politics. What interests us is the fact that they all are of the view that political (and ethical) consequences of causal analysis are problematic. As we will seek to show, they are right to note that causal analysis has possible political implications – causal narratives are indeed bound up in complex ways with political evaluations – yet, their arguments regarding the problems of causal analysis are weak and in need of much more reflexive engagement with both non-Humean ‘post-positivist’ accounts of causal explanation such as ours and the multi-faceted politics of causal inquiry.

### **Causal explanation and the ‘origins’ thinking: Maja Zehfuss**

An effective way to make intelligible Maja Zehfuss’ objections to causal explanation is to take a brief look at Jonathan Culler’s attempt to explicate Derrida’s idea of ‘deconstruction’. To illustrate what this consists in, Culler uses Nietzsche’s treatment of causal relations. Culler’s argument may be paraphrased and summarised as follows.<sup>7</sup>

‘Cause’ and ‘effect’ constitute a conceptual pair but, as is clear from a standard phrase, ‘cause *and* effect’, it is the first term, ‘cause’ that is given priority over the second; the ‘cause’ is accorded the position of the origin. However, Nietzsche has argued, in the actual sequence of experience, it is the effect that comes first; for example, we experience ‘pain’ and, then, ‘spying, perhaps, a pin, one posits a link and reverses the perceptual or phenomenal order, *pain ... pin*, to produce a causal sequence, *pin ... pain*’ (Culler, 1983: 86). It is the effect that causes us to call its cause ‘a cause’ at all.

However, ‘[i]f the effect is what causes the cause to become a cause, then the effect, not the cause, should be treated as the origin’ (Culler, 1983: 88). This is not to insist that the cause cannot be treated as the origin of its effect but rather to suggest that the way of thinking,

---

<sup>6</sup> See Harré (1964), however, on how scientific explanation always reaches a point of temporary suspension. We should reformulate Mackie’s statement as follows: where we have no hesitation in making causal statements we know or believe that there is some more detailed causal story to tell even though we may not in fact be able to do so.

<sup>7</sup> Zehfuss refers to all these authors in her article.

according to which something is given priority over something else as its origin, or what we might call the ‘origins thinking’, is dubious – for it is also possible to argue that the effect is the origin of something coming to be accorded the status of the cause.

Importantly, this ‘deconstructive’ way of engaging with causal relations, Culler points out, does not reject causal thinking as such. To say that it is the occurrence of the effect that *causes* us to identify its cause is obviously to make a causal statement. To deconstruct ‘causality’ (or the cause-effect pair) is not to reject causal thinking altogether but, by employing causal thinking itself, to show that what is commonly treated as secondary may also be primary and, through this demonstration, to displace the ‘origins thinking’, which gives rise to the idea of the primacy of the cause, or of the effect for that matter, in the first place.

Culler’s exposition of what is involved in ‘deconstruction’, summarised above, may or may not get at the heart of Derrida’s own thinking, but that need not detain us here. What is interesting is that, while not denying the importance of causal thinking, Culler, through his exposition of Nietzsche’s discussion of causation, has touched on one feature of causal thinking which is picked on by some as being problematic. This has to do with the ‘origins thinking’. To say that something caused something else tends to be part of the (politically and ethically significant) move to present the cause as though it were the origin, the uncaused cause (see Elias 1978).

Maja Zehfuss, who has applied Derrida’s thoughts in her critical engagement with contemporary world politics, provides a very good illustration here. In a short but important essay, written in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, she (2003) criticizes the prevailing interpretation that these attacks were the cause and the American response – the war against Afghanistan, the war against terrorism – its effect. Such an interpretation, she notes, is underpinned by a desire not to appear disrespectful of the dead and the prevailing political climate in which ‘explanation’ is treated as ‘exoneration’. She rightly argues that the 9/11 attacks were not the origin, the uncaused cause, of what ensued, but should be considered in the context of the history of inequality, military intervention and imperialism in world politics.

Just as Culler (or Derrida) was not opposed to causal thinking as such in their discussion of ‘deconstruction’, Zehfuss’ target here turns out not to be causal thinking or causal inquiries as such, but a simplistic causal diagnosis which posits what is presented as the cause as though it were itself the origin, the uncaused cause. Clearly, however, it is through causal inquiries, or through encouraging *more* causal inquiries, that we can prevent one, perhaps simplistic and pernicious, causal narrative from becoming dominant, a point that oddly seems to escape Zehfuss’ attention.

Still, in objecting to the dominant American interpretation of the sequence of events, in which the 9/11 attacks were presented as though they were the uncaused cause, the origins of all that followed, Zehfuss points to an important aspect of causal account-giving. Even though there is no such thing as an uncaused cause – for anything that counts as a cause in relation to its effect had in turn been caused insofar as anything that happens has been caused to happen – anyone giving a causal account of a given outcome will have to start the account *somewhere*. Every causal account has a beginning point; what the causal narrative tells is how the segment of the world unfolded *from that point on* and smoothed the way to bring about the outcome.

Herein lies the problem of causal explanation and the problem has a political dimension. When we formulate a causal account, what constitutes the beginning point, and what features of it are highlighted, is a choice we make, and this choice has potentially quite significant political implications – just as much as what we focus our attention on as the end result to be explained is a matter of decision, again with perhaps quite important political

consequences. And it is precisely because offering or favouring particular causal explanations, especially in the historical/social world, is likely to have political implications that we consider it important to engage in causal inquiries, not of a dogmatic kind – as though it is obvious what causes what – but of a critically reflective sort, which keeps open the possibility of different interpretations and the need to engage with them. Encouraging causal inquiries and debates brings politics back in and we believe we should acknowledge this point.

However, Zehfuss appears to have more critical things to say about the usefulness of causal enquiry *as such*. She talks about her ‘doubts as to the applicability of the notion of causality’ (2003: 522). Referring, in her notes, to the works of Nietzsche, as well as Culler’s discussion of his observation touched on earlier, she explains these doubts as follows (2003: 521-22):

Clearly, the events of September 11 have in some way set off the response, but at the same time the response has dictated what these events were: acts of terrorism from outside, which may be associated not only with a terrorist network, Al-Qaida, but also with a state, Afghanistan. The events of September 11 can function as a cause for the US war effort only thanks to this interpretation, which is an integral part of the war effort itself. The two are not independent, and thus do not fulfil the requirements of cause and effect.

Cause and effect are, of course, never as easily separated as they would need to be and Friedrich Nietzsche argues that this separation is fundamentally artificial and wrong. When people claim that lightning flashes, for example, they ‘posit the same event once as cause and then again as its effect’. Sometimes, cause and effect are mistaken for each other. Moreover, although the cause is supposedly antecedent, it is in fact imagined after the effect has occurred. Thus, cause-and-effect thinking raises more questions than it answers. What is more, in this case it is applied only partially.

That cause-and-effect thinking raises many questions is undoubtedly true; indeed, that is one important reason why we are concerned to promote it; if a causal question in the study of history and society were to yield a (correct) answer without necessarily raising any further questions, there would not be much intellectual or political interest in asking it. Yet, as Culler (1983: 86), among countless others, has suggested, it is well-nigh impossible to remove the idea of causality from our everyday thinking and living.

Still, Zehfuss appears to think that there is something fundamentally wrong or even self-contradictory/impossible about any causal thinking. Unfortunately, she does not articulate her objections very clearly in the above passage or in the rest of her article. However, her two main objections appear to be: (1) that cause and effect are supposed to be independent but in the case of the US causal claim, linking its response to what it presents as the cause, the two are interlinked and therefore it does not constitute a proper causal claim, if there be one; and (2) that, as Nietzsche has pointed out, we identify (or ‘imagine’) a cause only after we know the effect and that, in the American case, it is the response that has dictated what the cause is, or how the events of September 11 are to be presented.

But neither of these claims can be taken as undermining causal thinking *as such*. Zehfuss’ first claim involves a very common misunderstanding about cause-and-effect relations. To the extent that one event is said to have caused another, it is often suggested that the two events must be *independent* (e.g., Wendt, 1999). There is, however, something intuitively implausible in this assertion inasmuch as the cause and the effect must be, surely, *interdependent*: the effect happens *because of* the cause and the cause is a cause only *in*



*relation* to its effect. It turns out that, in an event-to-event causal relation, there is in fact no requirement that the two events be *independent of each other*; the only requirement is that they be *distinct*, i.e., not identical, events (Mackie, 1974, 32; Suganami, 2006). After all, if something causes something else, it is ‘something *else*’ that it causes.

If the US causal claim linked its response (war against terrorism, war against Afghanistan) to what it presented as its cause (Al-Qaida, supported by Afghanistan, attacking targets in the US), the claim is not *ipso facto* disqualified as a causal claim, therefore: clearly, Al-Qaida, supported by Afghanistan, attacking targets in the US is *not* the same event as America’s war against terrorism or war against Afghanistan. Whether the American causal claim is a *sound* one or not is, of course, a separate issue, concerning which both Zehfuss and we have serious reservations. But the claim is still a causal claim.

Zehfuss’ second point relates to Nietzsche’s above-noted observation that we experience the effect first and then, and only then, we look for its cause, so that, in an important sense, it is the effect that causes the cause to become the cause. We of course agree with Nietzsche on this point. It obviously cannot be otherwise; indeed, it is only when the effect in question is given precise descriptions that we can go on to ask for its causes. In fact, this is only a special case of a more general truism that we need a question, formulated in a specific way, before we can search for a relevant answer.

But the point Zehfuss wishes to convey seems to be a different one. She asserts that the ‘response has dictated what these events are’ and by this she seems to be suggesting that how the US represents the events of September 11 has been ‘dictated’ by what response the US has taken. We cannot, of course, discount the possibility that the US government, humiliated and desperate to demonstrate its power and efficiency, first took the decision to attack Afghanistan and to begin a campaign against terrorism *and then*, in order to justify these decisions, began representing the events of September 11 as ‘acts of terrorism from outside, which may be associated not only with a terrorist network, Al-Qaida, but also with a state, Afghanistan’ (Zehfuss, 2003: 521). However, whether this is what happened is clearly an empirical question. It has nothing to do with the observation Nietzsche is making which points to an intrinsic feature of *any* causal thinking (and, indeed, any explanatory activity). Unfortunately, by making what amounts to her own causal speculation (that the US response ‘dictated’ – causally necessitated – a particular representation of the ‘events of September 11’) seem as though it were consonant with, or even grounded in, the Nietzschean truism, Zehfuss is not only thinking causally but is in danger of making her own particular causal interpretation appear as though it were *necessarily* true. This would be quite ironic given her apparent wish to dissociate herself from causal thinking altogether.

Zehfuss is of course right to say that a simplistic causal narrative of the sort that takes the 9/11 attacks as the origins of everything else that followed in the US war effort is unsound. But she is wrong to condemn causal thinking as such in a totalizing way when what she should have been criticizing is a particular, oversimplistic, causal statement, employed to justify a particular course of action, rather than to make sense of a course of actions and reactions in their social and historical context. Zehfuss’s line of thinking leads us to take a look at another author who has expressed a similarly negative view about causal thinking. According to Jenny Edkins, however, causal thinking is misguided because it leads to a ‘technologising’ and de-politicising kind of engagement.

### **Causal explanation and ‘technologising’: Jenny Edkins**

In her thought-provoking article, ‘Legality with a Vengeance: Famines and Humanitarian Relief in “Complex Emergencies”’ (1996), Edkins engages in a multi-faceted critique of the causal theories of famine advanced by Malthus, Amartya Sen and others. According to her

(1996: 566), '[t]o see famine as either a natural disaster, as in the work of Malthus, or as an economic disaster, as in the work of Sen, ignores the way some people benefit from famine: there are what the new "complex emergency" paradigm calls "winners" as well as "losers"'. Later in her article, however, Edkins also criticises causal explanations of famine stemming from this 'complex emergency' paradigm.

It is not our purpose here to assess Edkins' treatment of particular causal interpretations of famine. It may be that certain dominant causal understandings of famine, which she examines, share a weakness that she points to – in particular, the tendency to technologise suffering and treat famine as though it were a scientifically solvable problem. However, we think that her underlying conception of causal thinking itself contains a number of problems which it is our aim to tease out.<sup>8</sup>

Against Sen's treatment of famine, on which she focuses much of her attention initially, Edkins writes as follows:

[Sen's] emphasis on 'factual investigation' and 'cause' puts the study of 'starvation' firmly in the realm of economics and social *science*: the answers to be sought are not in the form of *reasons* for actions (why one group of people allowed another group to starve to death; or perhaps why they killed them), but the form of *causal explanations*. Answers do not lie in the realm of the study of *relationships between people*, but in the *relationship of people to commodities*. There is to be no history or narrative of famine, no account of what happened in a particular case in terms of who did what. Instead, there is an account in terms of cause and result, an account that is quantifiable (1996: 565-66; see also Edkins, 2000: 64).

What we notice here straightaway is Edkins' apparent subscription to the notion of causal explanation as necessarily involving the knowledge of co-variation between quantified variables. It should be clear from our earlier exposition of causal explanation, however, that it is possible, and necessary in our view, to conceptualise causal explanation in a different way. According to our way of thinking, 'why one group of people allowed another group to starve to death' – which Edkins seems to consider as an important issue but necessarily omitted from what she allows under her 'causal' rubric – would in fact form a key part of what we regard as a causal explanation, or narrative, of what happened in a particular case of famine (provided, of course, that one group of people *did* allow another group to starve to death in the case being studied). Edkins' mistrust of causal enquiries appears therefore to be based *at least partly* on her unquestioning acceptance of the Hume-inspired idea that causal explanations are necessarily of the covering-law kind. However, Edkins' dissatisfaction with causal thinking seems quite deep-rooted; persuading her to alter her conception of causal explanation in the direction we suggest might not be sufficient to make her renounce her strongly expressed anti-causality stance.

Her complaint against causal thinking with respect to famine appears a few times in her article. The gist of her objection is that a causal approach to a social issue, such as famine, is fundamentally misguided because such an approach treats its subject-matter as though it were a problem that could be prevented or cured by the application of a correct remedy identified by the scientific experts. She writes:

---

<sup>8</sup> Here, we use Edkins (1996). Edkins (2000) is an expanded version of this article but no change is discernible in her thoughts on causal explanations.

Seeking a cause makes the problem seem like a sort of disease which we can either prevent (by development) or cure (by relief)... The solution [thereby suggested] is *technical or managerial* (1996: 567; emphasis added; see also Edkins, 2000: 66).

And she adds:

Sen's analysis can lead to a particular practice of famine relief, one that *technologises* suffering. Although Sen distinguishes his approach strongly from that of Malthus, in this important respect it remains similar. Both lead to a view of famine as a failure, a disease, that can be 'cured' or 'prevented' by 'intervention' by the state or the international community (1996: 568; emphasis added; see also Edkins, 2000: 65).

Edkins thinks this situation is problematic and offers two suggestions, inspired by Foucault and Derrida, respectively. She writes:

What we should be considering, according to Foucault, is not how to solve the problem or cure the 'disease', but 'what use is [it], what functions does it assure, in what strategies is it integrated?'. We should treat famine as a 'positive present'. What matters is not the search for the origins of famine, but understanding its function in the here and now, in a particular narrative of power and conflict (1996, 567; see also Edkins, 2000: 66).

Unfortunately, what it means to follow Foucault's line of approach and to understand how famine functions in a particular narrative of power and conflict, instead of searching for the origins of famine, is not fully spelled out. We would, however, suggest that such a narrative, synchronic/structural rather than diachronic/processual, would still be 'causal' in our way of thinking about causal explanation.

Such a narrative would explore how particular discourses of famine disable, condition and influence the social and political and thereby the relevant social actors, their power relations and their interactions. Discursive analyses are not non-causal because they do not seek to identify causal laws, specific causal events, or origins. Origins accounts, mechanistic accounts, and quasi-medical accounts are all instances of causal explanation but by no means do they exhaust it; discursive analyses that identify conditions of possibility or enabling contexts are just as causal even though the metaphors used to represent them may be different from the standard push-and-pull metaphor (Kurki, 2008).

Edkins' use of Derrida is more detailed than her treatment of Foucault in her article. Indeed, the article is written explicitly from what she calls the 'Derridean perspective' (1996: 547). She follows Derrida's line of thinking especially in critiquing the 'complex emergency' paradigm, according to which 'not only do international emergency intervention and aid not *solve the problem of* famine; aid, through the mechanisms of power and control which it enables, *produces* famine' (1996: 570, emphasises original; see also Edkins, 2000: 146).

While seemingly in sympathy with such an interpretation, Edkins in the end treats this line of thinking as falling into the same trap as any other causal (and, for her, *necessarily* 'technologising') approach. This is so because '[d]espite arguing that aid causes, or renders possible, famine and human rights abuses, it is nevertheless *almost immediately* suggested that the solutions could be found if "aid donors" approached the situation in a different way' (1996: 570, emphasis original; see also Edkins, 2000: 147).

At this juncture, however, Edkins' argument reveals a confusion or conflation of two distinct lines of thinking. *On the one hand*, she seems to be thinking that in dealing with

issues such as famine in the human social sphere, which is an open system, it is not possible to apply any remedy to *ensure* a cure. She seems to be saying that the consequences of human intervention are unpredictable and that, in the present case, whether famine relief ‘solves or exacerbates the famine is undecidable’ (1996: 570; see also Edkins, 2000: 147). *On the other hand*, almost immediately, the idea of ‘undecidability’ is re-used in a different way. She explains:

We have here an example of what Derrida calls the “double contradictory imperative”. On the one hand, famine relief must be given, since food cannot be withheld from the starving. On the other hand, famine relief must be withheld, since it is the relief aid that is causing the famine (1996: 570; see also Edkins 2000: 147).

It is easy to see that this is a standard case of what we usually call a moral dilemma whereby, importantly, the consequences of our decision to intervene or not to intervene are treated as known. Indeed, it is precisely because the consequences are presented as known that the situation can constitute a dilemma. The problem of undecidability in a genuine moral dilemma, however, is not of the same kind as the problem of uncertainty which we frequently face in the human social world whereby, due to its nature as an open system, the consequences of human intervention are difficult to tell, rendering scientific technologising often a misplaced endeavour.

Nevertheless, the gist of Edkins’s argument is that, in dealing with famine, we are faced with a situation of undecidability, which, as Derrida points out, makes it possible and necessary for us to act responsibly – precisely because we cannot act with the epistemic certainty with which causal knowledge claims are often presented by those experts who technologise human suffering.<sup>9</sup>

We accept that in the human social sphere causal diagnosis does not attain epistemic certainty.<sup>10</sup> Knowledge claims regarding the human social world, which is an open system, are undoubtedly shaky. No one can claim with certainty that a particular human intervention is going to bring about an intended outcome. This is one of the reasons why we often encounter contending causal interpretations and divergent prescriptions as to what must be done. We also think that contending causal diagnoses and accompanying prescriptions are often rooted in our moral, political and other value preferences. But, of course, this does not mean that ‘anything goes’ so far as our causal diagnoses lead to political interventions one endorses; differing causal diagnoses are not reducible simply to difference in politics and other value orientations. Causal explanations we offer are, *as explanations*, subject to inter-subject criteria of assessment concerning good causal argumentation, such as empirical testability and corroboration, coherence and intelligibility, a capacity to incorporate more detailed explanations, when required, without undermining themselves, etc (Suganami, 2008).<sup>11</sup> It is precisely because of this complexity that that we believe in the need to encourage debates between different people advancing different causal diagnoses and

---

<sup>9</sup> Edkins (1996) 569ff. Derrida’s discussion, which Edkins (1996: 570) draws on, concerns not so much a moral dilemma as a tension between the need to avoid ‘petty little nationalisms’ (Derrida, 1992: 39) and the establishment of ‘a hegemonic centre’ (Derrida, 1992: 40) in the cultural life of Europe. He (1992: 38) characterises this ‘tension’ also as ‘contradiction’ and ‘double injunction’. Such a tension, clearly, cannot be resolved by a scientific causal knowledge. But those who advocate a particular policy in this field are likely to offer a causal argument linking its adoption with a goal presented as desirable. Causal argumentation and politics are closely intertwined and, in our view, it is a key principle of causal enquiry to be sensitive to this fact.

<sup>10</sup> Certainty, of course, is not a realistic goal in any open system, social *or* natural.

<sup>11</sup> Such criteria may in turn have political functions but it goes beyond the scope of present analysis to consider this.

prescriptions rather than abandon causal debates altogether, as Edkins seems to suggest, on the grounds that their outcomes are necessarily aporetic.

### **Truth, politics and causality: David Campbell**

A similar, albeit a more specific, line of attack on causal analysis can be found in David Campbell's work. Campbell has advanced some of the most insightful analyses of the ways in which 'onto-political' assumptions embedded in political narratives and interpretations create the conditions of possibility for particular representations of world political processes and realities.<sup>12</sup> For example, he (1998a) famously argued that the Bosnian war was in important senses made possible by the kinds of truth claims media commentators and political and social scientists made about the relationship between ethnicity and conflict. Accounts of ethnicity and conflict, rather than representations of reality, he argues, come to constitute the Bosnian polity and its national-ethnic structure. Thus, it is our narratives presented as true accounts of realities out there that in important senses help construct, or literally make up, the world we study.

Herein lies the root of Campbell's scepticism of the idea of cause and causal analysis in social sciences. Since there is no single causal narrative that corresponds to 'what actually happened', and since all causal narratives can have pernicious and dangerous effects on the social world, we might as well 'direct attention away from a preoccupation with a search for *the* cause or origin of something, and focus instead on the political consequences and effects of particular representations and how they came to be' (Campbell, 1998a, 5). He further notes, in line with his onto-political leanings, that his approach is opposed to 'cataloging, calculating and specifying the "real causes"' of an event or process (Campbell, 1998b, 4) and therefore it is the construction of the reality of specific causes that we should concern ourselves with.

This constitutes a deep-running criticism of causal analysis and importantly implicates causal analysis in the 'politics of construction' of the social world. It repeats Zehfuss' concern with singular origins accounts but also introduces the idea that causes are never real but rather accounted for, and hence 'really existing' only in our narratives – with potentially pernicious political effects for our ability to recognise the contingency and political contestedness of social life. Elsewhere we have argued against Campbell's position on two grounds: (1) that it is based implicitly on association of causal analysis with Humean accounts of cause and (2) that it is based implicitly on a causal understanding of the role of discourses and truth claims in the social world since discourses of truth are assumed to *impact on* the structure of social life (Kurki, 2008; see also Wight, 2006). Yet, these criticisms need to be reinforced by a discussion of an additional objection, which relates to the 'political' edge of Campbell's criticism.

As has been argued above in relation to Zehfuss, from the perspective of a causal narrative approach, commitment to causal analysis *per se* does not necessitate a commitment to singular truth claims. In fact, in our view, causal analysis is about sorting through, debating and appraising competing causal narratives: this is, in fact, at the heart of causal analysis and causal evaluation. Indeed, a plurality of causal accounts is the starting point for causal debates: if there weren't many different interpretations of an event or process, causal

---

<sup>12</sup> Drawing on William Connolly's work, Campbell (1998, 22) defines 'onto-political' as follows: 'To say a political interpretation is "onto-political" highlights the way in which "it contains fundamental presumptions that establish the possibilities within which its assessment of actuality is presented".' Against those approaches in human sciences which do not openly acknowledge their onto-political leanings, Campbell (1998, 23) argues that a deconstructionist approach explicitly notes and 'projects' ontological presumptions into actual interpretations of reality, acknowledging the key role implicit assumptions play in accounts of reality.

debates would be meaningless.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, the best causal debate is had when those arguing for particular causal interpretations openly and frankly embrace and explore the strengths and weaknesses, as well as biases and political consequences, of their own account as well as those of others.

Crucially, this does not mean that ‘anything goes’, that *every* account of cause is as good as any other. Campbell (1998a: 43), along the lines of Hayden White, is of the view that competing narratives are judged by ethico-political criteria and not by their accurate representation of reality. The question of truth of a causal account can only be resolved ethico-politically. Our position is subtly different, and the difference of perspective is crucial to note. While we too recognise the importance of exploring the differences and the differential consequences of different types of causal accounts, this does not mean that debaters of the cause of Bosnian war, or First World War, or of Ethiopian famine, cannot acknowledge and argue that some accounts may do better than others in responding to specific queries we have – on the grounds explored in the debate, accuracy being one possible ground. Indeed, all causal accounts, while being in part politically informed, also engage with empirical data and evidence and seek to provide coherent answers to specific (and sometimes subtly different) questions. If understood in this way, causal analysis cannot be seen as *just* ethico-political but as a process which, more broadly, allows us to explore the often unexplored and unrecognised features, structure and consequences of specific formulations of causal relations, thus allowing us to sort through, simultaneously, both questions of evidence and questions of politics. For example, through such a process, we may be in a better situation to appreciate which aspects of an account of a specific war, for example, may be ‘ideological’ and which may be persuasive on other grounds. Separating evidence and politics is difficult, perhaps impossible, but the debate itself can facilitate in exploring the questions of politics as well as accuracy.

This view of causal debate is different from Campbell’s in that, while recognising politics of causal analysis, it does not reduce causal analysis to mere politics but keeps open the possibility that causal narratives may be both political and more, or less, persuasive on other grounds, such as grounds of accuracy. At the same time, causal analysis of such a kind *need not* be adverse to Campbell’s (1998a: 4-5) concern with facilitation of approaches which are sensitive to the structure and consequences of truth claims and assumptions, approaches which ‘untie what appears to be sewn up’.<sup>14</sup>

Campbell has a further issue with causal analysis, however. This concerns the tendency of some causal accounts to expunge the contingency of social life. He rejects those accounts which see discourse determining all outcomes ‘such that all accounts of human agency are expunged’ (Campbell, 1998b: 219).

Crucially, for Campbell, explanatory causal analyses may hide ‘the complexities and contingencies of politics’ (Campbell, 1998b: 221); they do so, according to him, by treating fluid social phenomena, such as ‘culture’, as though they were fixed objects. Thus, according to him, it is because of the inadequate politicisation of social phenomena (such as culture) that causal accounts are politically dangerous. His politics involves pluralisation and destabilisation of ‘truth narratives’ then: ‘only by pursuing the agonism between closure and

---

<sup>13</sup> This is a position comparable in interesting ways to Hayden White’s emphasis on need for a plurality of narratives for narrativization to make sense. See discussion in Campbell, 1998a, 37.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, we find our position curiously close to those of Campbell and Zehfuss; we are in agreement with the pluralist ethos of their work and applaud their efforts to examine world political events from the angle of unusual (causal) narratives. Indeed, it appears to us that what they seek to oppose are simplistic forms of causal analysis which have gained hegemonic status, not causal analysis as such. Yet, their reluctance to engage with causal terminology and accounts is, we believe, a mistake.

disturbance, naturalization and denaturalization, can a democratic ethos be lived' (Campbell, 1998b: 227).

We are not averse to the (explanatory or political) position Campbell is pushing but we take exception to his dismissal of causal accounts as part of his stance. It seems clear that causal enquiries are central not only to studying how the world works but also to studying what political consequences our beliefs about how the world works have on the world. Indeed, one of the virtues of causal analysis – when conceived of as involving providing causal narratives – is that it brings together our (inter)subjective experiences, our politics and the world (as accounted for by others as well as ourselves) and facilitates political debate and pluralism as well as explanatory reflexivity and humility. If so, Campbell's anti-causality on political grounds is unnecessary. Contingencies and pluralities of interpretations can be acknowledged, while debate structured around causal claims provides a rationale for the empirical and political debate.

It is our belief that causal analysis and debate can be seen as a valuable critical theoretical tool which forces us to appraise, in a reflexive manner, the complexities of any (including our own) causal accounts and their consequences socially and politically. Certainly, the fact that we cannot directly access the 'real causes' of an event is no reason to abandon causal debates and explorations. Indeed, it is these explorations and their consequences that Campbell is himself exercised by. In short, we advocate the need to engage in causal enquiry and, as part of that process, to engage in causal debates because different causal interpretations have significant political implications.

### **Politics of responsibility: Friedrich Kratochwil**

A somewhat different interpretation of the dangers of causal analysis arises from the recent work of Friedrich Kratochwil and has also been implied in slightly different forms in other works, such as that of Toni Erskine (2003). Kratochwil – one of the early scholars to express scepticism towards causal analysis on philosophical grounds through his pragmatist-constructivist understanding of the social world – adds to this critique an interesting 'political' angle in his contribution to a recent edited volume by Adler and Pouliot (2011).

Kratochwil's comments on causality are scattered in his wider discussion of practices but set out a coherent, if unduly restrictive, position on the dangers of causal analysis. Kratochwil emphasises two things: first, the contextuality and historicity of all concepts, including causality, and the need to pay attention to concepts' practical uses in social life; and, second, the problematic nature of the language of efficient causality because of the consequences it is claimed to have for our ability to speak about questions of responsibility. Let us discuss these two objections in turn.

The first arises directly from pragmatist philosophy, it would seem: within pragmatism the 'truth' of concepts is considered a meaningless question as the concern is with the usefulness of concepts for our understanding of our surroundings and for our practices. Kratochwil (2011: 46) emphasises the pragmatist interest in investigating and taking seriously everyday uses of concepts and the need to recognise the plurality of concepts, understandings of concepts and 'truths' in social life. We should also recognise the political struggles to which concepts and their uses are linked.

From this viewpoint it is no surprise that Kratochwil (2011: 52) emphasises the contingency and limited nature of causal analyses. 'Efficient causality' is not the only way to explain things, he argues; nor is it particularly useful in getting to grips with the role of rules in shaping how 'we go on'. Social rules, for example, he argues 'do not work like causes precisely because they are not designed for creating identical responses...rather they enable people to "go on" and can have different consequences for different individuals in different

contexts' (Kratochwil, 2011: 54). Causal analysis is too singular in nature to explain the role of such factors and hence other types of explanation, such as 'constitutive explanation', is required. Nor can we easily form singular causal accounts about events when we cannot have direct access to people's reasoning. Objective causal accounts are therefore problematic.

We are sympathetic to this line of thinking. Informed by pragmatist leanings, our understanding of causality too also draws in part on pragmatist notions of intelligibilifying and emphasises the existence of multiple interpretations and truths. Yet, we do not agree with Kratochwil's scepticism towards causality. This is because he fails to consider the ways in which his own assumptions about causality are embedded within an unduly constricted causal discourse where singular causes and objective causal accounts are assumed.

Furthermore, he ignores the plurality of meanings that causal language and claims can take, as well as the openness of interpretation and respect for diversity of perspectives that causal debate can encourage and foster. Indeed, as we have pointed out, causality is not a notion tied to 'science' and 'objectivity', as Kratochwil assumes, but lives a life of its own in our everyday language and practices (Kurki 2008; Suganami 1996). Capturing and exploring this plural language and the variety of politics of causal explanation that arise from different ways of explaining the same processes would seem to be the logical conclusion of Kratochwil's type of analysis. The context of the causal language we use matters, as well as the context of causal debate more generally. Kratochwil's anti-causal stance prevents him from exploring the complex politics involved in the differential uses of causal accounting and narrativising.

This is not all. Kratochwil's understanding of the relationship between causality and responsibility is problematic in another sense. He is concerned about the ability of causal language to capture debates about responsibility. He provides an example to illustrate the problem. He writes:

When an interstate highway bridge collapses, for example, next day's newspapers will attribute it to the earthquake that occurred. However, when an investigation examines the case the causal attribution might quickly lose its explanatory value when such things as shoddy workmanship or the crass violations of building codes are cited. Here the conjunction of several independent, necessary, but insufficient 'causes' does the explaining. And things get even more complicated when we find out that the decision of the zoning board and planning commission to build the bridge in this particular location (despite unstable foundations) instead of choosing a safer alternative 20 miles north, was due to the corruption of several board members. In that case the earthquake – while not irrelevant – loses its status of an 'explanation', as questions of responsibility now attain prominence. In short, we ask for explanations in a variety of contexts that cannot all be forced into the Procrustean bed of causal efficacy (Kratochwil, 2011: 52).

While superficially persuasive, Kratochwil's position is based on ill-thought-out assumptions about causality and responsibility. He implies that causal language relates only to material causal explanations – such as the analysis of the structure of the bridge. Questions of responsibility seem to evoke a different order of questions. What Kratochwil does not consider or mention, nor do others who make similar points about the distinction between moral and causal responsibility (Erskine 2002), is that the notion of cause not only has its origins in the notion of responsibility (*aitia*) but is, according to most non-Humean views of causal analysis, including our narrative view, inextricably intertwined with attributions of responsibility. Given that non-positivist and non-materialist accounts of the social world, which ask questions concerning moral responsibility, is what Kratochwil is after, it is striking to us that he does not investigate how causal explanation and moral judgements



are tied together through exploring critical social theory and non-Humean accounts of cause. After all, asking causal questions – why and how something is engendered – and answering them is a key condition of our attempts to make moral judgements on responsibility. It is true that moral evaluation of responsibility is not entirely dependent simply on causal judgements – our moral and normative frameworks or criteria also matter – but without the ability to talk about what conditioned, shaped, influenced or affected the actors whose responsibility is judged, ethico-political judgments become unfeasible. Not only are causal accounts informed by ethical and political context of the analyst (as we have seen previously) but also to be able to attribute responsibility to an actor – moral or otherwise – we need to have a good understanding of the causal context of the actor. Not only is causal analysis a necessary preliminary step towards allocating responsibility but also allocation of responsibility inevitably shapes our causal account and in that sense causal analysis and analysis of responsibility are intricately intertwined.

This is also why ensuring plurality and diversity of causal accounts is important. Causal analysis can of course take many forms and be linked to various different types of analysis of responsibility: we can adopt an agent-centric or structural view, or anything else in-between. Depending on our analysis – as well as our ethical dispositions (which are often in subtle ways cross-fertilised by our causal analysis) – we will come to attribute responsibility to actors in different ways. Thus, to refer to Kratochwil's example, one commentator will decry the board members actions, specifically pointing their finger at a specific individual politician perhaps, who s/he perceives as central to the corruption case. Another will point to the structural politico-economic situation of local councils: they, in the absence of adequate state funding, are forced into the market place of bidders and thus become subject to big companies' lobbying practices, which have come to verge on corruption. Here responsibility is devolved to other echelons of government. In the case of both readings, crucially, not only is responsibility discussed but so is causality. Causality is intricately tied to the politics of responsibility allocation as well as everyday political judgements. To pretend otherwise, and neglect the importance of a wide variety of causal claims that may arise from our frameworks – even if implicitly and under seemingly non-causal language – is to ignore the centrality of a common conceptual orientation in the analysis of social life, one which involves narrating and intelligibilizing causal processes in the world around us.

But does this mean that we *insist* on the use of 'causal language' rather than other languages or concepts (of, say, contingency or conditions of possibility) in debates and discussions in international politics? No. It may be that the language of overt causality does not always 'serve' our contextual needs and of course other vocabularies also exist with different political and normative consequences. Indeed, often causal claims remain implicitly causal only – our accounts may refer to 'because', 'influences', 'conditions', or 'reasons'. Yet, it is also useful to reflect on the underlying causal aspects contained in accounts phrased in implicitly causal languages. Why? Because such implicitly causal language is more widespread than often assumed (by positivists and critics alike) in IR and social sciences – and in everyday life. Crucially, such language structures the nature of our engagements with many explanatory and normative questions and hence it is important to pay attention to it in understanding why we or others come to the judgments they do on specific questions. It is also important because overt engagement with the validity claims of different kinds of (causal) stories can give us a better sense of where we disagree and agree in making normative and ethical judgments in world politics.

Indeed, this is why we plea for more open and reflective engagements with causality: causal language is useful in explicitly bringing out – or exposing – explanatory and political-normative positions and dynamics of complex analytic and ethical debates. It is not

necessarily about origins, truths, efficient causality or depoliticisation but also makes up a part and parcel of political and normative debate, can facilitate respect for pluralism of perspectives, and may encourage reflexive interrogation of others' and one's own claims and assumptions. Kratochwil (2011: 49) may be right in saying that pragmatism has been useful in liberating us to question the idea of 'cause', as well as 'science' and 'objectivity', but surely wrong in implying that such a perspective has brought us to a 'final' understanding of the meaning of causality (as problematic) – or its political dynamics.

### **The critics and causal explanation**

We have aimed to demonstrate above that the arguments advanced by the four critics are problematic on a number of fronts. It may perhaps be thought, however, that the difference between the position of the four authors and our own position is simply a conceptual or even a semantic one – that they, unlike us, have a narrow, Hume-inspired, conception of causation/causal explanation and once we persuade them to accept our broader conception of causation/causal explanation, they will come to realise that they too are, in our terms, engaged in causal analysis. This, however, is not the main, let alone the only, thrust of our argument.

Indeed, not all of the scholars we have dealt with adhere to the narrow, Hume-inspired, concept of causation/causal explanation. The problem we found rather is that their idea of causation/causal explanation is often vague and underdeveloped. They have, in our view, not thought carefully about the nature or functions of causal analysis in the study of world politics and yet they seem adamant that we should stay clear of it. Our main aim has been to make sense of this to us rather strange situation by engaging with their arguments.

We do of course believe that there is much to be gained from exploring wider conceptions of causation/causal explanation and engaging with the narrative mode of causal explanation we expounded earlier. It is unfortunate that the four critics have shown little interest in interrogating and exploring alternative views of causation/causal explanation as this might have led them to reconsider their one-sided accounts of the politics of causal explanation.

Wider accounts of causality do not suggest that all descriptions or explanations are necessarily causal, nor that all that critics should do is more 'causal analysis'. The point we make is that through more constructive, informed and open engagement with what causal analysis can mean and entail, better accounts of world politics, and the politics of those accounts, can be developed. Self-reflection on and moral evaluation of our accounts of world politics that the four authors call for can be helped, not hindered, by opening up to, rather than simplistically rejecting, causal analysis and causal language. Indeed, deeper and wider engagement with the philosophy of causation in general, we argue, is desirable. What we aim to call for here is more constructive and open engagement with causal analysis and the politics of it. This can be achieved partly through better appreciation of the narrative view of causation we propose here. This perspective can help partly because it substantiates, clarifies and expands on why some of the core criticisms made by the authors examined here are so important to take into account in analysing world politics.

Indeed, we agree with the authors here in many respects. Crucially, as we have stated at various key junctures in our involvement with their arguments, we too believe that causal explanations, when brought into the public domain, have political consequences. But, whereas they focus their attention on pernicious consequences, our view is that causal debates should be encouraged, rather than avoided, precisely because not to do so may lead to a situation where a particular kind of causal explanation with what we would consider as undesirable consequences becomes hegemonic. The only way to make sure to prevent such

an eventuality, in our view, is to encourage a critical and self-reflective attitude in our own causal investigations and debates in the public domain.

Underlying our thinking here is our view that causal explanations do have political (and ethical) dimensions. They do so in two inter-related ways. First, there will be found to be some value-based input into the making of causal explanations and some of the values which guide them are likely to be politically significant. In order to formulate a causal account, it is necessary to have a particular outcome in mind as that which requires an explanation. What this is and how it is to be characterised involve judgements as do the issues of where to begin the narrative and how the beginning point is to be characterized. What questions are to be dealt with and addressed in what terms, and what questions remain or are left unasked, in the process of intelligibly connecting the beginning and the end, too, involve judgement. And these judgements reflect, among other things, what we take for granted, what we conventionally accept, what we find particularly curious and worthy of research, etc, which are likely to be interlinked with our political values. Second, the causal narratives and answers we produce are likely to have political implications, or consequences intended and unintended, beyond their primary functions, i.e., to explain, to make the puzzling outcomes somewhat more comprehensible than before the explanations were given. And our view is that all these possible political input and output, presuppositions and implications are likely to be wide-ranging – in fact they are quite likely to reflect more or less the full range of political values present within our society – such that to engage in causal inquiries and produce causal answers is an activity which is broadly coextensive with politics.

This does not of course mean that, since causal explanations are necessarily political, they are contaminated by subjective features, ‘anything goes’, and causal inquiries could not be taken seriously. Causal explanations have to fulfil the function of explaining, which means they have to contain good explanatory argument. There is no algorithmic formula which tells us what such an argument should look like. But there are inter-subjective assessment criteria in the light of which we regularly engage in causal debates. In such debates, we may, for example, point to the issue of relative factual accuracies, or appropriateness of the terms in which certain events are depicted. We may debate about the reliability of the sources used and whether the sources used are adequately extensive. We may consider the intelligibility of the narratives and the appropriateness of what is assumed away in constructing them. We may discuss the significance of the range of questions addressed and the possible implications of the ways in which the narratives are constructed and emplotted. Indeed, these are very standard ways in which we reflect on our own and other researchers’ causal accounts in our day-to-day activity of being an academic specialist or an intellectually-inclined citizen.

Importantly, how much of what we are calling here a causal debate (concerning the pros and cons of a given causal account) is a contention about ‘the world as it is’ and how much of it concerns political and ethical presuppositions and implications cannot be determined in the abstract; this will depend on the nature and content of the particular causal account being debated about, who is taking part in the debate, and what is treated as contentious.<sup>15</sup> All we can say is that it is through engaging in debates of this sort that we begin to understand the strengths and weaknesses of various causal accounts (including our own), and their assumptions and implications, on the basis of which we can come to some overall judgement as to which causal accounts, *if any*, we should tentatively subscribe to and why. It may of course be that our answer turns out to be ‘none’. But this by no means

---

<sup>15</sup> How far the contention about the ‘world as it is’ is really a political one is, of course, a possible point of contention in such a debate,

suggests that we should decide in advance to say ‘no’ to all causal accounts because we already know that their political implications are simply and overwhelmingly pernicious.

### **Conclusion: Towards the politics of causal inquiry**

We began this article by stating our understanding of what a causal explanation of any given outcome consists in. We rejected the covering-law model of explanation as largely inapplicable to the study of world politics and as not very helpful in making the process of the emergence of any outcome comprehensible. In our view, to give a causal account is to formulate a causal narrative, beginning at some point, addressing the questions raised in relation to the process of transition, connecting the beginning intelligibly to the end, the eventual occurrence of the outcome. Such a mode of explanation does, however, incorporate from time to time a species of covering-law explanations in the form of generalizations which are invoked to suspend the need for further explanation by suggesting that the particular turns of events in question are ‘as expected’. Our rejection of the covering-law model of explanation is consonant with our philosophical stance on the Humean conception of causal relations (or causation-in-the-world) as mere regular conjunctions. But we have already dealt with this issue in our earlier separate publications (Kurki 2008; Suganami 1996) and it was unnecessary to develop our arguments on this issue further in this paper.

This paper has been intended as a contribution towards what we wish to see revive, or continue with even stronger rigour, in the social scientific and historical studies of world politics, i.e., critical and reflexive causal inquiries and debates. As such, the main aim of the paper has been to critique those influential authors who have expressed negative views about the consequences of engaging in causal inquiries. Their common line is that producing causal explanations has overwhelmingly negative political consequences and that therefore it is better to abandon getting involved in such an enterprise in the first place.

We found such a position implausible – for surely political consequences of producing causal accounts or narratives could not, in our view, be uniformly and overwhelmingly negative. A particular causal account, when brought into the public domain, may have some undesirable political consequences. But surely one could not conclude from this that *all* causal accounts have such consequences or that causal inquiry *as such* had better be abandoned.

We suspect that, despite their anti-causal pronouncements, the critics’ substantive positions may in some respects be quite close to our own. Broadly speaking, we believe that they too will emphasise the need to be reflexive about causal claims, the importance of allowing for a pluralism of and debate between causal narratives, the significance of recognising the politics of all causal claims, and the need to oppose simplistic and hegemonic causal claims and their pernicious consequences in the study and practice of world politics. A reflexive approach to causality of the kind we advocate here should be acceptable, even attractive perhaps, to them; in any case, we see little reason for scholars of any variety, and especially those who present themselves as politically engaged, *not* to take part in causal debates. It is a close engagement with causal logics and narratives that enables us to bring out the core structures of argumentation, hidden assumptions, and the politics of even those accounts which appear, or pretend to be, neutral or apolitical.

No doubt, a suspicion will persist in the minds of the critics of causal analysis. They may suggest, for example, that causal analysis is at its base seeking to implement a reformist agenda of ‘improving’ social life but that all such efforts should be seen as politically and ethically problematic.

Following some reflection, we have come to appreciate that there may indeed be a ‘reformist’ politics underlying our own emphasis on the importance of causal enquiry in the study of world politics. This reformism is fairly simple and under-determining in structure. It seems clear to us (1) that human interventions affect the world and the course of its history, (2) that we speculate on and can, at least in some cases, predict the likely consequences of our interventions with some confidence at least in the short term, and (3) that it is our role, as researchers or practitioners, to contribute to reducing harm in the world. Our emphasis on causal analysis reflects some commitment to these points.

While it is for another paper to elucidate in more detail the consequences of such reformism, what is crucial to note about such underlying politics is that they seem to be, we contend, more widely accepted than often noted or acknowledged. Indeed, we suspect that even those who are most outspoken in their anti-causal stance implicitly adhere to these basic politics of causal explanation. After all, to warn against engaging in causal inquiries because they have pernicious impacts is an instance of reformism: ‘no causal enquiries, a better world’.

Committing to the importance of causal explanation does *not* entail that we have to have singular analyses of the world or how to change it, that we should think that the world is predestined or that we can necessarily affect the world in such a way as to increase or reduce the level of harm. Indeed, we are both sceptical of those who argue over-confidently that this or that way of organizing mankind is going to, or is destined not to, reduce harm.<sup>16</sup> Yet, we believe that social scientists’ and historians’ social and historical responsibility lies in contributing to reducing harm in the world (and, as social theorists, we can debate about the fundamental issue of what constitutes ‘harm’) and hence in some form to causal enquiries and debates.

This is our politics of causal explanation (underlying our stress on the importance of causal enquiry) and we believe it to be acceptable also to many current critics of causal explanation. If it is not, in the spirit of reflexive critical social inquiry, we call on the critics of causal inquiry to specify further their reasons, and political justifications, for their rejection of causal analysis and debates, which for us stands at the heart of, rather than in opposition to, critical social inquiry.

## References

Campbell, David (1998a) *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity and Justice in Bosnia*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Campbell, David (1998b) *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Collingwood, R. G. (1938) ‘On the So-Called Idea of Causation’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, new series, 38: 85-112.

Culler, Jonathan (1983) *On Deconstruction: theory and criticism after structuralism*. London: Routledge.

Davidson, Donald (1963) ‘Actions, Reasons, and Causes’, *Journal of Philosophy* 60: 685-700.

---

<sup>16</sup> For example, Suganami (in Linklater and Suganami 2006) has criticized the so-called solidarists and pluralists (of the English School) for their advocacy without sufficient evidence in relation to the protection of human rights.

- Derrida, Jacques (1992) *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*. Translated by P.-A. Brault and M. B. Naas. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Edkins, Jenny (1996) 'Legality with a vengeance: famines and humanitarian relief in 'complex emergencies'', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 25 (3): 547-575.
- Edkins, Jenny (1999) *Poststructuralism and International Relations: Bringing the Political Back in*. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner.
- Edkins, Jenny (2000) *Whose Hunger? Concepts of Famine, Practices of Aid*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Edkins, Jenny (2003) *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Elias, Norbert (1970) *What is Sociology?* New York: Columbia University Press.
- Elias, Norbert (1991) *The Symbol Theory*. London: Sage.
- Erskine, Toni (2003) 'Making Sense of "Responsibility" in International Relations: Key Questions and Concepts', In *Can Institutions Have Responsibilities? Collective Moral Agency and International Relations*. Edited by Toni Erskine. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 1-17.
- Fierke, Karin M. (1998) *Changing games, changing strategies: Critical investigations in security*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Fierke, Karin M. (2005) *Diplomatic interventions: conflict and change in a Globalizing World*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Geertz, Clifford (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- George, Alexander L. and Andrew Bennett (2005), *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Hansen, Lene (2006) *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War*. London: Routledge.
- Harré, Rom (1972) *Philosophies of Science: an Introductory Survey*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Hempel, Carl G. (1965) 'The Functions of General Laws in History', in Hempel, *Aspects of Scientific Explanation and Other Essays in the Philosophy of Science*. New York: Free Press, 231-43.
- Hollis, Martin and Steve Smith (1990) *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Kratochwil, Friedrich (1989) *Rules, Norms and Decisions, On the Conditions of Practical and Legal Reasoning in International Relations and Domestic Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kratochwil, Friedrich (2011) 'Making sense of international practices', in *International Practices*. Edited by Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 36-60.

Kurki, Milja (2008) *Causation in International Relations: Reclaiming Causal Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lake, David A. (2012) 'Why "isms" Are Evil: Theory, Epistemology, and Academic Sects as Impediments to Understanding and Progress', *International Studies Quarterly* 55: 465-480.

Levy, Jack S. (1989), 'Domestic Politics and War', in R. I. Rotberg and T. K. Rabb (eds.) *The Origins and Prevention of Major Wars*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 79-99.

Linklater, Andrew and Hidemi Suganami (2006) *The English School of International Relations: A Contemporary Reassessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mackie, John L. (1974) *The Cement of the Universe: A Study of Causation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Russett, Bruce (1962) 'Causes, Surprise, and no Escape', *The Journal of Politics*, 24, 3-22.

Scriven, Michael (1959) 'Truisms as Grounds for Historical Explanation', in P. Gardiner (ed.), *Theories of History*. London: Collier Macmillan, 443-75.

Stone, Lawrence (1994) *The Causes of the English Revolution*. London: Routledge.

Suganami, Hidemi (1996) *On the Causes of War*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Suganami, Hidemi (2006) 'Wendt, IR, and Philosophy', in Stefano Guzzini and Anna Leander (eds.), *Constructivism and International Relations: Alexander Wendt and his Critics*. London: Routledge, 57-72.

Suganami, Hidemi (2008) 'Narrative Explanation and International Relations: Back to Basics', *Millennium* 37(2): 327-56.

Suganami, Hidemi (2011) 'Causal Explanation and Moral Judgement: Undividing a Division', *Millennium* 39 (3): 717-34.

Wendt, Alexander (1999) *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: CUP.

Wight, Colin (2006) *Agents and Structures in International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zehfuss, Maja (2003) 'Forget September 11<sup>th</sup>', *Third World Quarterly* 24 (3): 513-528.

